

**Homily for the Mass and Blessing of the new school addition,  
Saint Michael Catholic Parish, Sigel, Illinois  
Mass for Sunday of the 19<sup>th</sup> Week in Ordinary Time, Year B | August 11, 2024, A.D.**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good for us to be here today for this Mass and Blessing of the new school addition at Saint Michael Parish in Sigel. I commend all those involved in this project for having the vision to do this and the wherewithal to bring it about. At a time when some Catholic schools in other places are closing or struggling to stay open, it is a testament to the strength of the faith in this community that you are growing.

In the Fall of 2015, I published my second pastoral letter, entitled, *Ars Crescendi in Dei Gratia*, Latin for “The Art of Growing in God’s Grace.” In it, I wrote, “The art of growing in God’s grace is the key to growth in the Church. Building a culture of growth in the Church starts with inviting people to experience the love of Jesus Christ.” All of us are not just called to receive God’s love for ourselves, but to become instruments of that love in those around us! One of the best ways to invite young people to experience the love of Jesus Christ is through our Catholic schools.

As we bless this new addition to Saint Michael School as a new school year approaches, I would like to call your attention to some guidance I shared last year for our Catholic grade schools and high schools in a document entitled, *Higher Calling, Higher Standards: Renewal of the Mission of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois*.<sup>1</sup> I noted that, “The Catholic Church educates more than ten-thousand students in thirty-six Catholic grade schools and seven Catholic high schools in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. These forty-three schools represent the Church’s largest investment of resources in pastoral ministry in our diocese, reflecting both the requisite resources for operating effective schools and the high priority we place on handing on the faith to the next generation. More than places of academic learning, our schools are centers of formation for children and community for Catholic families.”

On the plus side, “Our schools are staffed by dedicated teachers and administrators who have devoted their lives to the formation of our young people. Our Catholic school system is a central pillar of our faith community and brings much vitality, purpose, and clarity of mission.”

On the minus side, “Our schools, however, are facing significant challenges that, if left unaddressed, threaten to undermine their stability,

vitality, and effectiveness in fulfilling their mission of discipleship. To varying degrees, our schools are facing financial, operational, and cultural disruptions and risks just at the time when the need for a Catholic school system is more urgent than it has been for several generations. Our schools are in urgent need of renewal.”

To address these challenges to fulfilling our high calling, I described seven essential characteristics to which Catholic schools in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois must be held. The seven defining characteristics are:

1. *Inspired by a Supernatural Vision:* All aspects of the instruction, curriculum, environment, and culture of our schools are rooted in and flow from a faith in and understanding of the Blessed Trinity as the deepest reality, and embrace our destiny to live eternally with God.

2. *Imbued with a Catholic Worldview across the Curriculum:* Flowing from the supernatural vision, our schools reveal the unity of the Creator in creation. In teaching math and science, we reveal the intelligibility, and goodness of creation, which points back to the intelligence and goodness of the Creator. In art and music, we reveal the transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness that point us back to the source of all that is true, beautiful, and good. In literature and history, we explore the human soul and moral life in relation

to God, and the drama of the human response to God's loving plan and the providence and active presence of God in the unfolding of human life.

3. *Founded on Christian Anthropology*: Our policies, curriculum, and instruction help young people to come to a fuller understanding of their identity as children of God. We equip our students to flourish by helping them to build habits of virtue and avoid habits of vice, and we foster a sense of peace and confidence in their identity as children of God, created in His image, and redeemed and recreated in Christ.

4. *Animated by a Spirit of Community and Communion*: Our schools exist to support parents as the first teachers of the faith, to strengthen and enhance the lives of families, and to provide a community in which Catholic families can live and raise their families together.

5. *Sustained by Gospel Witness*: All administrators, teachers, staff, and coaches in our schools fulfill a prophetic role of witness by their lives and serve, explicitly, as ministers of the Church. They are called to preach the gospel in what they say and how they live, and they instruct and encourage young people to do likewise. Our students are called to bear witness inside and outside of school in how they treat others, in their concern for the poor and marginalized, and in their upright living in harmony with the Gospel. Our

school families are called to live in a manner that reflects their baptismal identity and their vocation of raising children in the faith. This is begun and accomplished most essentially and most effectively by attending Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation.

*6. Accessible, Affordable, Stable:* In each parish and deanery, pastoral plans are established to ensure that all the faithful have access to Catholic schools. Each school will establish a plan to fully fund its operations through financial support of the parishes and benefactors without charging tuition. The continued viability of Catholic schools will thus require stewardship on the part of the whole community of faith.

*7. Organized and Governed from the Heart of the Church:* Each of our school communities finds its identity, mission, and purpose within the Catholic community. Our schools are governed from the authority that Christ has entrusted to the diocesan bishop as a successor to the apostles. Parish schools or community Catholic school systems are to be governed by pastors of participating parishes, and governing boards of high schools or other schools not directly sponsored by parishes. Schools sponsored by religious are to involve the diocesan bishop or delegates, along with local pastors in their governance to ensure the alignment and shared mission of Catholic education.

I am grateful to our priests, principals, teachers, parents, staff, and benefactors for the important roles they fulfill in promoting Catholic education. Please pray for a holy and healthy school year.

Our passage from the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Saint John's Gospel today continues from the "Bread of Life" discourse that we began two weeks ago, when we heard how Jesus had fed 5,000 people with five barley loaves and two fish and then came to his disciples, walking on the water. These signs disclose his divine identity, but the crowds and the disciples see only the miracle, not its deeper sign value. In last Sunday's Gospel passage, Jesus explains the deeper meaning of his multiplying the loaves and fishes. He reminds the people that God was responsible for the miraculous feeding in the desert with manna, the "bread from heaven," as described in the Book of Exodus. Jesus makes His divine disclosure to the people: "I am the bread of life." This bread brings life everlasting, satisfying all hunger and thirst beyond our imagination.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus says something that the audience interprets literally and thus completely misunderstands. They murmur and complain because He has stated that He is the bread that came down from heaven. Using Exodus imagery, Jesus implies that He is the true bread from heaven – and not the manna. The people wonder: How can Jesus be the bread

of life? Taking this statement literally, the Jewish listeners argue that, in fact, Jesus comes from a family known by everyone. How can He say that He has come down from heaven? Jesus calls a halt to their arguing and moves the issue to a deeper level. Signaling the importance of what He is about to say by introducing it with the double, "Amen, amen, I say to you," Jesus fully identifies himself as the Bread of Life. Because he is the Bread of Life, whoever believes in him will have eternal life. The manna in the desert was very helpful – but only temporary at best. Jesus, the Bread of Life, is not temporary. He comes down from heaven, and whoever eats this bread will never die. Why? This bread is the Bread of Life. And here is where Jesus makes the final point: His flesh is the Bread of Life for the world. This bread from heaven satisfies ultimate human needs. This bread is none other than the Eucharist.

This Gospel message about Jesus being the Bread of Life is very timely, coming just after our National Eucharistic Congress took place last month in Indianapolis, where 60,000 Catholics gathered for this moving and memorable event, and countless more joined us via livestream. The National Eucharistic Revival, of which the Congress was a major part, now continues with a special Year of Mission, which calls for Catholics to share their rekindled love of the

Eucharist with other people. This is an essential aspect of our being disciples of Jesus Christ and stewards of God's gifts of creation.

Our first reading today from the First Book of Kings is a prophecy telling us how God will strengthen His people for their spiritual journey. Feeling tired and dejected, Elijah finds a tree that offers a bit of shade from the desert sun, so he sits down and prays. Ideally, a prophet would pray for guidance about how best to serve God. Instead Elijah has decided that his service to God is over. He even asks God to take his life, arguing that he feels just as lifeless as his deceased ancestors. With his prayer finished, Elijah falls asleep, presuming that God will take his life just as he has requested. God ignores Elijah's prayer for death. Instead, God sustains the prophet's life with food and water. But even this positive response provided by a messenger from heaven does not change Elijah's thinking. After finishing the meal, the prophet simply lies back down. It seems he still insists that God take his life. So God sustains the life of the prophet a second time, with the angel of God telling Elijah that that he needs strength for the journey he will take. We are told that "Elijah got up, ate, and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb" (1 Kgs 19:4-8). Similarly, when we feel tired and dejected, our Lord strengthens us for the journey with the Eucharist.

Now, your parish has already begun following Christ as disciples and stewards, so when Our Lord comes to us again today in this Eucharist, each of us is invited into an even more complete following after Him. Today it is my joy to join you all in our worship of God and receive the gift of His Son in this Eucharist. I pray that all of you will continue to work with your Pastor, Father Hyland Smith, in seeking to be intentional disciples of the Lord and generous stewards of the gifts entrusted to us for the growth of the Church as we journey together, strengthened by the Eucharist, toward our inheritance in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of *Higher Calling, Higher Standards* can be accessed online at [https://dio.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Higher-Calling-Higher-Standards\\_Final.pdf](https://dio.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Higher-Calling-Higher-Standards_Final.pdf).